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## Urban Migration and Cross-Border Networks: A Deconstruction of the Akha Identity in Chiang Mai

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都市流入と国境を超えたネットワーク  
—— チェンマイにおけるアカ族アイデンティティーの脱構築

(タイ北部の都市) チェンマイに移住する山地民は近年急速に増加している。チェンマイ在住のアカ族を対象に彼らの移動とネットワークのダイナミズムにせまり、アカ族アイデンティティーの現代的様相、将来の展望を検討する。かつてアカ族の慣習(ザン)がアカ族アイデンティティーの拠り所とされてきたが、村においても都市においても彼らを取り巻く環境は著しく変化した。キリスト教化が進み、中国人としてふるまうオプションも加わった状況はアカ族からタイ人への移行というかつての分析枠組みでは捉えきれない。そこで、個人レベルの人間関係に焦点をあて、実際のそれぞれの場面で異なる役割、期待、仲間意識、行為を分析することによって、彼らを取り巻く政治・経済的状況、相手との力関係、ライフステージに応じて臨機応変に変化するアイデンティティーの生成過程を解明しようと試みた。

### I Introduction

Over the last twenty years, owing to the dramatic improvement in road transport it has become much easier for the Akha to access lowland areas. The influence of the media, recruitment agencies, social gossip and the need to get a Thai education in order to access better job opportunities has strengthened the wish of the Akha to stay in the lowland. According to research by Vatikiotis in 1982, the Akha population in central Chiang Mai was estimated to be 76 [Vatikiotis 1984:200]. It is now estimated to be around 2,000 (1996).<sup>1)</sup> According to Dr. Leo, a Dutch anthropologist specialising in the Akha, about one in seven Akha no longer live in hill villages in Thailand today.<sup>2)</sup>

A third, urban-based generation has already emerged who have grown up in the city, and they have few opportunities or need to go up to the mountains. The number of the younger generation (between the ages of 15 and 25) who have no experience of working in the rice fields is increasing rapidly. For them, it is sometimes harder to pursue their life in the mountains than in

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1) Thanks to the help of three Akha friends, we could count 1,647 (790 males, 857 females) Akha residing in central Chiang Mai in October-November 1996. As we know that we did not count quite a number of Akha, particularly illegal workers, we estimate that the total number was around 2,000.

2) Amongst the 70,000 in Thailand, 60,000 resides in the villages, 10,000 are out of the villages. "Twin problem belongs to the past" [Bangkok post, 15 August 1997].

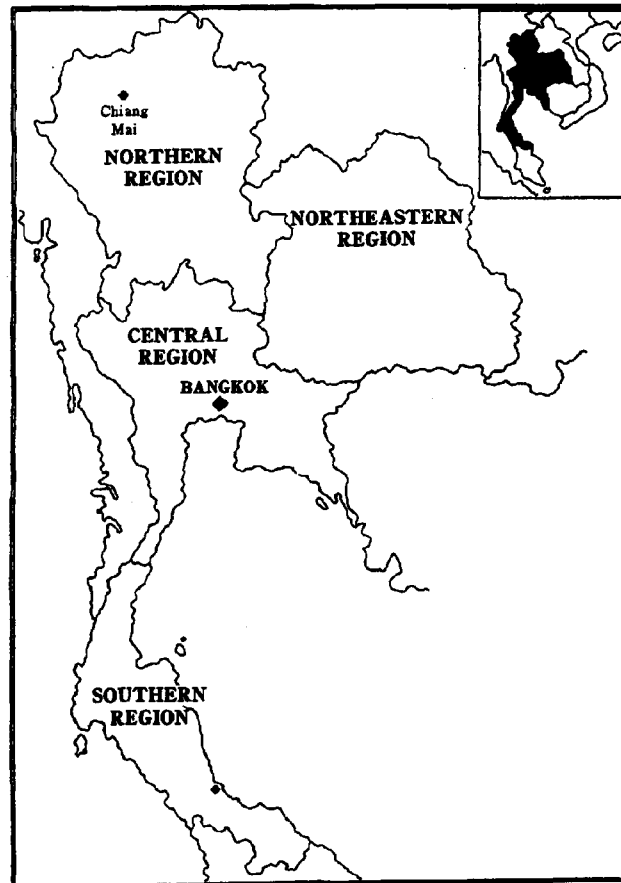


Fig. 1 Thailand

the city. It is obvious that the number of such 'highlanders' will increase even more in the future.

Most previous research on the highlanders in Thailand has been carried out as mountain village case studies; few studies exist concerning the issue of urban highlanders. Thus, this study sets out to examine the urban Akha in Chiang Mai, the principal urban centre of northern Thailand<sup>3)</sup> (see Fig. 1: the research site map). It is necessary to supplement the existing rural village case studies with urban research in order to understand the current situation of the Akha.

The issue of ethnic identity has been among the primary foci of past Akha studies in north Thailand. One of the key elements identified as a foundation of Akha ethnic identity by previous researchers is "Akhazang." This term was translated by a missionary [Lewis 1969-70 ; 1989] as 'religion, customs, a way of doing things' and by other anthropologists [Alting von Geusau 1983 ; Kammerer 1986 ; 1989 ; Tooker 1988 ; 1992] as the Akha 'way of life', a customary set

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3 ) According to the statistical reports of Chiang Mai province, the population of Chiang Mai district was 246,892 in 1994.

of laws including proper and improper behaviour for both ritual and non-ritual contexts. They objected to the missionary's translation using the word 'religion' because *zang* is not something to 'believe in' as in the western notion, but something to 'carry'.<sup>4)</sup> Tooker stated that "If you do not carry Akhazang, you are not permitted to live in an Akha village. If you do not live in an Akha village, you cannot, for the most part, carry Akhazang, since the proper structure is not there" [Tooker 1988:38]. So, what happened to the Akha living in towns? Alting von Geusau noticed that the way the Akha conceive Akazang is not static but dynamic. Nevertheless, I question to what extent it is still valid for the urban Akha to rely on "the authority of a succession of sixty-four generations of patrilineal ancestors during the long journey from Tibetan borderlands into China, Burma and Thailand" [Alting von Geusau 1983:249].

Often young Akha say, "There are too many Akha customs," or, "They are demanding" and, "Akha customs are too complicated." In fact, Akha customary knowledge, "the dense and highly formalized traditional system prescribing the Akha way of life" [*loc. cit.*], is inherited and kept only by a few experts. Thus, it is not public shared knowledge but private property. In this sense, as Inamura [1994:19] noted, the Akha are attracted by Akhazang, because it is difficult to understand. And because of its complexity, the authority of the experts has been highly regarded. However, how will this be inherited by the younger generation studying instead at Thai schools who hardly have a chance to learn it? It is clear looking at today's circumstances that to follow these Akha customs is not a practical option for the urban Akha.

Moreover, theoretically, it is misleading to set the shared common customs as a basis of Akha ethnic identity. Because it leads us to see Akha as a social category rigidly persisting with a unique self-contained distinctive set of customs, language, religious practice, etc. Since Leach's stimulating work [1954] first raised the question of applying a static notion of ethnic identification to the highly multi-ethnic mosaic area between mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China, a number of studies have questioned the rigid boundaries of ethnic categories. The issues of ethnicity — how ambiguous, manipulative and situational ethnic boundaries are — have been actively discussed.<sup>5)</sup> Today, it is recognised that ethnic identity is not an inherent bounded phenomenon as once assumed, but an ever-changing process. Few would now accept that ethnic identities are an immutable primordial heritage. Instead, ethnic identity is symbolically constructed, selected and ascribed both by a group of people by themselves and by others' perceptions in the respective context. Therefore in pursuit of this argument, the object of my research<sup>6)</sup> is not to examine how the Akha shared customs are deteriorating as a result of the urban migration process, but to account for the dynamic nature of ethnic identity.

4) This verb 'carry' can be used as same as to phrase 'to carry a load'.

5) See for example, Barth [1969], Conrad [1989], Dentan [1976], Handelman [1977], Keyes [1976 ; 1979 ; 1995], Lehman [1979], Lilley [1990], Mitchell [1974], Moerman [1965], Nagata [1974], Okamura [1981], and O'Brien [1986].

6) The field research was conducted from July 1994–November 1996, with supplementary research in February 1997, and May–June 1997. The primary data were collected with the following methods:

(1) Semi-structured interviews with 343 informants (122 males, 221 females);

a. Economic Condition   b. Educational background, Motivation   c. Marriage and Family situation ↗

Conventionally, the behaviour of migrants in towns was conceptualized in terms of 'detrribalization', by which commentators meant the falling into disuse of customs, beliefs and practices to which the migrant firmly adhered before he came to town [Mitchell 1974:18]. However, my aim is to deconstruct the pervasive presumption that associating distinct cultural features with discrete ethnic groups establishes primordial identity. Indeed, identities change in response to socio-political environments. Thus, I intend to examine the process by which the symbolic distinctions and alliances are created, affirmed or denied, and the way in which urban Akha identities are manipulated in such processes.

A combination of subjective factors – self-ascriptive determinants –, and objective factors – socio-political settings – were taken for analysis. As Tanabe noted, "The ethnic identity of a particular group is constructed in a continual and complicated process not only by external forces and arbitrary labeling by outsiders but also by their own social process of creating self-image" [Tanabe 1991:3].

There are four different levels of context to be considered in this study: first, the immediate interactions of individuals; second, the regional characteristics of Chiang Mai as an ethnically plural society; third, the Thai national policy and its view towards the hilltribes – their disadvantage in being second-class citizens; fourth, the wider international socio-political situation – demands involved in seeking exotic cultures through tourism (see Toyota [1996]), movements to preserve indigenous cultures, and the emergent popularity of China as an economic opportunity.

This paper will comprise three parts. Firstly, introductory information on diversification among the Akha in Thailand will be reviewed. Secondly, social changes due to the current socio-political and economic pressures and the mechanisms of urban migration 1970-1997 will be illustrated. Thirdly, research findings and analysis – the various processes by which individuals attribute, abandon and select their identity will be demonstrated through four key urban Akha informant life histories. It is intended to demonstrate the way in which identities are reconstructed between the subjective elements – actor's ascriptive determinants – and the objective elements – political and socio-economic constraints imposed upon them by the wider setting.

## II The Akha

The Akha language falls within the Tibeto-Burman group. The Akha are widely scattered in the border areas between Southwest China<sup>7)</sup> and Mainland Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Laos, Thai-

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- ↘ d. Social Networks (friendship, neighbourhoods, village ties, kinship, workmates, classmates, religious links)
  - e. Future Prospects
  - (2) Life history and social network records of key informants;
  - (3) Participant observation (marriage, funeral, housewarming party, swing ceremony, new year ceremony).

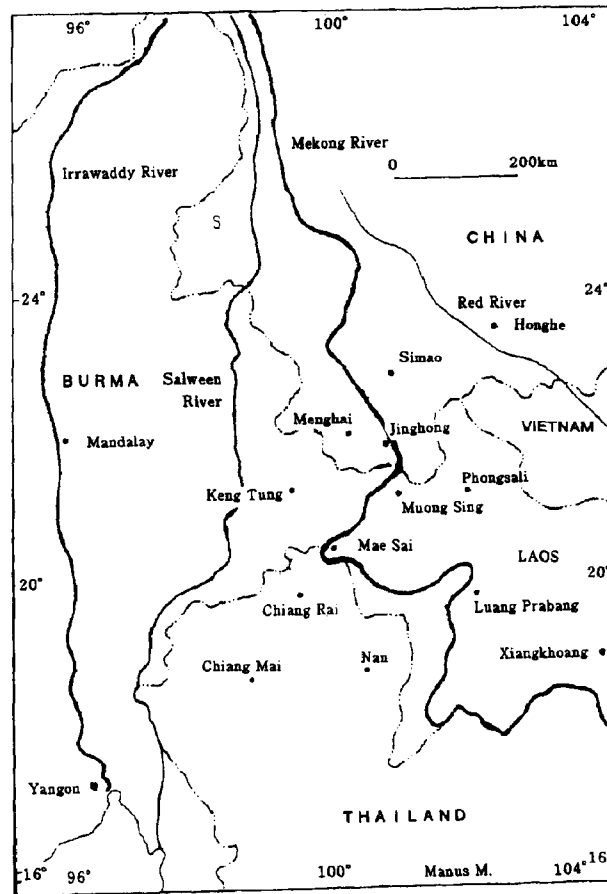


Fig. 2

land and Burma (see the Fig. 2). According to a personal conversation with Prof. Shi Jun Chao, an Akha researcher at the Yunnan Academy of Social Science in China, the total population of the Akha/Hani was roughly estimated to be about 1,820,000 in 1996. The distribution of the population is suggested as: 1,260,000 in Southwest China (the third largest minority in Yunnan province), 60,000 in North Vietnam, 70,000 in North Laos, 50,000<sup>8)</sup> in Thailand and 380,000 in Burma.<sup>9)</sup>

There are abundant terms to indicate the groups put into the Akha (Hani in Chinese) category. According to Chinese minority social history research documents (1986), there are 11 different sub-groups; 哈尼 (Hani), 豪尼 (Haoni), 多尼 (Duoni), 海尼 (Haini), 和尼 (Heni), 雅尼 (Yani),

7) According to the Chinese Ethnic minority policy, the Akha is included in the category of the Hani.

8) Thai official statistics in 1995 indicates that the number of Akha villages is 256, the population being 49,903.

9) Whereas Dr. Leo, a Dutch anthropologist specialising in the Akha in Thailand stated that the total population is about 2,500,000 in 1997. 2,000,000 in China, 20,000-25,000 in Vietnam, 92,000-100,000 in Laos, 70,000 in Thailand and 150,000 in Burma. (personal conversation in November 1997)

下別 (Kabie), 下多 (Kaduo), 碧約 (Biyue), 哦 (O), 阿木 (Amu). The Akha in Thailand claim to have 8 different sub-groups. The 3 major groups are Ulo, Lomi, Pami. There are also 5 other minor sub-groups; Pya (who call themselves Ulo), Naka (from the village of Naka in Burma), Upi (who wear the same traditional costume as the Lomi), A-Keu (related to the Shan, their women's head dress are turban style),<sup>10)</sup> and A-Jaw (similar to the Ulo).<sup>11)</sup>

Three elements are used to distinguish sub-groups among the Akha both by outsiders and by themselves: firstly, geographical location (name of place or mountain nearby); secondly, the shape of women's head dress; thirdly, genealogical terms. However, it is incorrect to perceive these sub-groups as a socio-cultural collectivity with clearly bounded discrete characteristics, because they often overlap with each other, and individual members disagree with each other on the way distinctions are identified.

In the case studies, I will look at three main sub-groups – Ulo Akha, Lomi Akha, and Pami Akha. These terms are often used by outsiders because it is easy to designate an identity by looking at the shape of the women's head/dress. Indeed, it should be noted that this does not imply internal cohesion or boundedness, however, this division of sub-groups – Ulo, Lomi, Pami – is a useful device in order to account for the variation of the Akha in Thailand. Thus, I consciously include all three major sub-groups of the Akha as my key informants because their diversified life experiences highlight differences in their processes of adjustment to city life. Their different degrees of confidence affects the way they project themselves. These terms are recognised by most of the Akha informants as characteristics by which they identify themselves.<sup>12)</sup>

The first sub-group Ulo Akha is the most populous group in Thailand. Ulo Akha were the first Akha migrants into Thailand. In genealogical terms, most of them belong to Dzjeugh'oe and Majeu clan groups. It is said that the first Akha settlement inside the Thai border was founded in 1903 [Alting von Geusau 1983:246].<sup>13)</sup> Most previous research in Thailand was conducted among this group [see Feingold 1976 ; Alting von Geusau 1983 ; Kammerer 1986 ; Hansson 1983 ; Takemura 1981 ; Suwa 1992]. Ulo Akha are sometimes viewed as a deviant group by the more recent Akha migrants from Burma or China. They say that the Ulo Akha lie outside the Akha political system,<sup>14)</sup> a system which more or less remained until 1949 around the border region of the Shan states of Burma and Sipsongpanna in Yunnan province of China. Ulo

10) Some informants think that A-Keu Akha is related to Yunnanese Chinese.

11) This information was provided by the Akha informant working at the Association for Akha Education and Culture, Chiang Rai, Thailand.

12) The author is fully aware of its ambiguity and such usage is theoretically misleading. However, it was interesting to find in the course of research that many of the informants have fixed images of these three sub-groups.

13) Whereas an Akha headman from Paya Phai Kao claims that his village has been there since 1887.

14) Since the Mongols extended their empire by 'using barbarians to control barbarians', the same approach succeeded during the Ming era. An indigenous Akha lord was appointed to govern his own people and resettlement area. His position was given by the Tai king in Yunnan, and was inherited patrilineally.

Both Lomi Akha and Pami Akha have been a part of this political system. (See also footnote 19)

Akha village life is characterised as egalitarian [Alting von Geusau 1983:266-274 ; Kammerer 1986]. Most Ulo Akha informants were born in Thailand and simply moved from their village down to the lowlands and then to Chiang Mai.

Lomi is the name of a mountain in the region of Keng Tung in the Shan states of Burma and most of the Akha of this subgroup come from this region. The first in-depth ethnographic research of this group was conducted by Deborah Tooker [1988]. In genealogical term, as Tooker noted [*ibid.*:17-18], they themselves are aware of contradiction when they call themselves as the Dzjeugh'oe clan group in order to differentiate themselves from Ulo Akha (who also claim to be Dzjeugh'oe clan group). Other Akha, sometimes called them Ubya, use a term referring to the flat silver panels on the head dress they wear [*ibid.*:18]. The term Ubya is also used by Pami Akha when they name themselves. They have lived for centuries in areas where the dominant lowland group was Tai and thus historically their political structure has been deeply influenced by the Tai. Tooker demonstrated that the Akha hierarchy is embedded just as much in their ritual space as it is in that of the lowland polities. Interestingly, this sharply contrasts with the Ulo Akha village, considered as egalitarian by Alting von Geusau [1983] and Kammerer [1986]. Tooker even suggests applying the same cosmo-political spatial symbols used by the lowland Tai as a way of identifying a widely shared socio-political system [Tooker 1996]. Some close associations with the Shan (Tai groups in the Shan states of Burma) were found amongst Lomi Akha informants during their life history. Many of the informants lived in Burma before coming to Thailand in the early years of their life. They are perceived by the other Akha as being 'hard-working' and 'good at carrying tradition'.

The Pami Akha are the smallest in number. Pami indicates the name of a single village near Mae Sai. Because of their economic success and relatively higher involvement in trade activity [see Toyota 1998], Pami Akha are influential in spite of the fact that they are the most recent migrants into Thailand. In genealogical terms, many of them belong to Mopoku clan group. Before the Chinese revolution in 1949, the villagers lived in the borderlands between Sipsongpanna and Burma. Some of them subsequently fled from China with the Kuomintang. Thus Pami Akha are also called La Beu Akha (La Beu means Chinese in Akha language)<sup>15)</sup> by other Akha as they are from China and have close associations with the Chinese. However, they call themselves Ubya Akha, the same term by which sometimes refer to Lomi Akha. Many of the Pami Akha informants could speak Cin-Haw (Southern Mandarin) as well as Tai due to their periods of living in China and Burma before coming to Thailand. Some informants even lived in three nations – China, Burma and Laos – before coming down to Thailand, and to Chiang Mai. Pami Akha used to have a symbolic head of their political structure, called 'Jawba' which lasted for nine generations. There are some direct descendants of this family from Pami village, who now reside in Chiang Mai. According to the informants from China, "Jawba said that he was a father of all of the Akha except the Ulo Akha."<sup>16)</sup> As a result, the Pami Akha still look down on the Ulo

15) The term La Beu includes Han Chinese, Yunnanese Chinese and Overseas Chinese.

16) Quite a few Akha from China attended the funeral of Saje (who died at the age of 87 in June 1997); ↗



Akha today by saying, "They are lazy, dirty and disorganised, and that they have been in Thailand too long."

### III Social Changes and Akha Urban Migration

#### *The 1970s*

The image of 'hill tribes' serves the mass recreational quest for exoticism. In 1971, several Ulo Akha from three villages – Saen Chai, Saen Suk and Pladu – were brought to Chiang Mai by Thais to work as entertainers at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Centre where stereotyped images of the 'primitive', 'unspoilt', and 'exotic' culture show were presented to serve the desires of tourists. Although some Akha made irregular visits to Chiang Mai as well as Bangkok in the 1960s to trade<sup>17)</sup> or carry out some official errands, this was not extended to settling down. Since 1970, their residential area, next to the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Centre has become a meeting point for urban Akha and visitors from the uplands.

At that time, in the 1970s, there were probably less than 50 Akha individuals residing in Chiang Mai, mostly young females or girls working either as entertainers or as domestic servants for Thais, Chinese and westerners. It seems that from the beginning the level of female migration exceeded that of the males. Vatikotis conducted a survey in 1982 which indicated males constituted 35% and females 65% of the Akha in Chiang Mai [Vatikotis 1984:200]. This trend continues up to the present day. Although figures obtained from a survey conducted by the author in 1996 indicate that males constitute 48% and females 52%, I am well aware that quite a number of Akha females were missed out, particularly domestic workers and illegal workers. Most Akha residents in Chiang Mai believe that the number of females exceeds that of males.

Among the Akha, whose kinship is strongly patrilineal, the parents' expectations conceiving their sons and their daughters are different. Women are expected to perpetuate the male line of the family by giving birth to sons. Despite the ideological emphasis on fertility and the cosmological value of femininity [see for example Kammerer 1986 ; 1989], in reality women are constrained by their marriage. For example, if a wife cannot bear children, the husband can legitimately marry a second wife. If an Akha woman comes back to her father's house after the divorce, she is allowed to stay only a few days, and must quickly remarry. During the 1970s, and continued in the 1980s, these customs urged the urban migration of Akha women to avoid un-

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↘ he used to be a secretary of Jaw Ba, Sipsongpanna in China, and fled into Burma, and later Thailand, after the cultural revolution (1966-). He stayed in an Akha village near Doi Mae Salong. Interestingly, there were no Ulo Akha participants at the funeral. According to Alting von Geusau who extensively studied Ulo Akha, reports a legend that the great ruler Jaw Ba was slain with a cross-bow by one of the original village leaders because he oppressed his subjects by demanding excessive tribute, such as "nine large cups of ants' tears" and "nine large cups of insects' brains" [Alting von Geusau 1983 ; Lewis 1969-70:40-44].

17) According to an informant (male 52), his grandfather, an Akha trader in Sipsongpanna, China, had already visited Chiang Mai and he heard stories about Chiang Mai when he was a small child.

wanted marriages.

According to an informant (female 44), who has been living in Chiang Mai since the early 1970s, Akha women in the village have little choice. They are expected to help their mother when they are young. Parents prefer to keep their daughters at home rather than send them to school. And then, around the age of 15-18, they are expected to get married. Women experience only working in the fields, and at home, taking care of a husband and children. Particularly if the husband is irresponsible, they have to endure a hard life. It is not uncommon to find a couple where the husband drinks and beats his wife. One informant had married an Akha man when she was young, but the marriage ended in a few years in an unfortunate way. Rather than face married life with another Akha man, she was happy to come down to Chiang Mai to work as a domestic servant, first for a Border Patrol Policeman's family, and subsequently for an Australian family. After a few years of domestic work, she started working at a public radio station as an Akha announcer (1973). She then brought two of her younger sisters down to Chiang Mai for education. She said that, "Life in Chiang Mai was not easy, sometimes very hard, but at least we have more freedom. Once you see the big world you cannot go back." Both of her younger sisters married German tourists and now live in Germany. As she had had such a bad experience when she was young, she does not want to get married again. She has stayed single. In her own words, "I do not want to be oppressed by men."

Before settling down in Chiang Mai in 1976, another informant (female 35) had experience of working as a domestic worker in Bangkok when she was 15 years old. She left her village when she was 14 years old, and studied for a year in Chiang Rai at an adult education programme. At that time, her Thai language ability was still rather basic. Then she was sent to a Thai family in Bangkok to work as a domestic worker. She worked for 9 months, receiving only 500 Baht when she resigned. She did not go back to her village but stayed in Chiang Mai because she wanted to go to school. At that time her older sister also lived in Chiang Mai, was able to provide help.

In 1975, an Akha woman (Pami Akha) opened the first stall selling handicrafts to tourists in the Night Bazaar. Though Ulo Akha were already selling handicrafts on a small scale at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Centre, nobody ever dared to open a stall at the Night Bazaar. Since then several Akha women have gradually followed her example, and this location has become an important meeting point for urban Akha and visitors. At that time selling handicrafts was a good business. They could take advantage of their Akha language skills and networks when they bought handicrafts from villagers. In this way, the tourist market provided an opportunity for them to earn cash incomes. An informant (Ulo Akha female 46) who started working at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Centre in 1970, said, "The Pami Akha are good at business. They are clever, and sometimes shrewd like the Chinese. That is why even though we came first we are still poor; whereas, although the Pami Akha came later, they are all successful and rich."

In the 1970s, most of the Akha in Chiang Mai had not received a formal Thai education, and their Thai language skill was rather poor. When they came down to Chiang Mai, they quickly learned to speak English as this was necessary to do their business with the tourists at the

Night Bazaar: some in fact learned to speak better English than Thai. Interestingly, while the Ulo Akha born in Thailand could hardly speak Thai, some of the Lomi Akha from Burma could speak Northern Thai because of the close association with Shan people in their home town in Burma. Indeed, this communication skill facilitated their settling down in Chiang Mai.

### *The 1980s*

Several social and economic development projects conducted by government agencies and NGOs were implemented during the 1970s and 1980s. These development projects were aimed at substituting opium cultivation and increasing local incomes by introducing other cash crops such as cabbages and ginger. Consequently, the cultivators shifted from subsistence farming to wage labour,<sup>18)</sup> and an increasing number of highlanders had to buy staple food, such as rice, from the lowlands. Thus earning a cash income had become critical for future survival.

Development of infrastructure has helped to improve access from remote parts of the country to the lowlands and from the lowlands to mountain villages. Due to this improvement, government administrators have gained better access to facilitate control over the border area by instructing each inhabitant to register within a geographically bounded administrative hamlet. Village boundaries have been arbitrarily drawn up, and habitants are compelled to settle down within these boundaries. The casual mobility of individuals or families without an ID card was officially prohibited. A village headman was assigned to each village and required to come down to attend regular administrative meetings. These village headmen assigned by the government are often not the same person selected as headman by the community, because the government requires a man with Thai language skills, but not necessarily Akha practical knowledge or customary laws. Thus, this imposed political process has resulted in the creation of a new political power within the village.

Many of the interviewees mentioned that their main reason for coming down to Chiang Mai was to go to school. What is especially remarkable in Chiang Mai is the availability of a night school, allowing them to work in the daytime and study at night time. Most of them come to school to acquire a certificate, as it is obvious that with a higher qualification they may succeed in getting a better paid job. Thus, they normally try to finish their education as fast as possible, up to P6 (elementary school 6th grade) level, then on to M3 (secondary school 3rd grade) level.

An informant (female 31) said she could hardly speak a word of Thai when she went to a government funded sewing course for hill tribes in Mae Chan at the age of 14. When she was 17 years old (1982) she was asked to come down to Chiang Mai to do domestic work. The wage was 200 Baht a month. In spite of the fact that she remembers being unable to speak Thai and feeling unhappy, plus enduring a low wage, it was her own decision to come down to Chiang

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18) This does not imply that the Akha used to enjoy subsistence life in an isolated community. On the contrary, Akha oral texts reveal the fact that they were involved in trade activities and also practiced in selling their labour to more powerful, prosperous neighbours. Thus what I indicate here is a matter of degree.

Mai. She said, "Staying in the village there is no future, nothing. But if I come to the city, it is up to me whether I have prospects or not. It depends entirely on my own efforts." She worked hard. She studied from P1-P4 (primary education from the first year to fourth year) in a year, from P5-M3 (primary fifth year and sixth year and secondary education from the first year to the third year) in 3 years at the adult school. When another informant (male 41) came to Chiang Mai at the age of 24, he only had basic knowledge of Thai as he had learned it from a Western Missionary when working as his assistant. At first, he lived with an American missionary family in Chiang Mai, and during that time went to adult school to study from P1 to M3 level, a course which would normally take 9 years to finish, but which he completed in 5 years (1980-1985).

Besides adult education or night school, there is a special institution which provides accommodation, food and education for male highlanders in Thailand – Buddhist temples. Some years ago the Thai government launched a programme of Buddhist missions to encourage hilltribes to convert to Buddhism in order to create loyalty to the nation. It was a part of a national integration programme concerned with the national security of the border area [see Keyes 1971:551-567 ; Tambiah 1976:434-471]. This Thammacarik programme "was approved by the Council of Elders of the Sangha and has been run since 1965 as a joint endeavor of the Department of Public Welfare and the Sangha" [Keyes 1971:562]. Under this programme, some Akha boys were brought to lowland Buddhist temples. It was based on official thinking that to become Thai is to become Buddhist.

The principal temple is located at the foot of Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai and is well known for accepting large numbers of highland boys every year. An informant (male 26) went there at the age of 10 with his cousin to learn Thai. He said "It was the first time for me to come to Chiang Mai. But my mother was happy because it was a good deal – free accommodation, free food and free education."

Until around the mid-1980s, it was rather difficult for development workers to persuade parents to send their children to Thai schools. Akha parents preferred their children to remain at home and help with farm work rather than leave for study, they particularly did not see much value in sending their daughters to school as they wanted them to help with the house-keeping. However, with the effects of deforestation and soil erosion their environment has changed drastically in the last twenty years or so. Akha no longer see a bright future in farming and are well aware that a better education is a necessary prerequisite for acquiring a better income.

The Fifth Five-year Plan (1982-86) designated Chiang Mai as the commercial and service centre of the upper north of Thailand, with special emphasis on the promotion of tourism. Since then, Chiang Mai city has rapidly developed to become a prominent commercial centre providing various jobs for highlanders. The number of handicraft stalls owned by highlanders at the Night Bazaar has rapidly increased. Some Akha started working as trekking guides or porters, and among them some have even organised an independent trekking business. Due to the recruitment demands of the service, commercial and industrial sectors, the number of jobs for unskilled

wage labourers, particularly young females, has grown considerably.<sup>19)</sup>

#### IV Urban Migration Mechanism in the 1990s

Many Akha who live on what is officially Royal Forestry Department (RFD) land do not have a regular Thai ID card. Instead, most of them have hill tribe ID cards, which do not grant them the right to make legal claim for land. Technically, most hill land remains the property of the state. The Royal Forestry Department (RFD) was allocated all 'unoccupied land' in 1898, when the definite boundaries of the Thai nation state were 'mapped', and this included forests occupied by hill tribes. In the 1980s, parts of the forest were designated as wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. In 1985, the National Forest Policy classified forests into conservation forest, economic forest, and degraded forest suitable for agriculture. The percentage designated as conservation forests keeps rising, from 15% in 1985, to 25% in 1992, and to 27.5% in 1993 [Sturgeon 1997]. Strictly speaking, communities are not allowed to live in these areas. Thus the five-year re-forestation project (1993-98) in highland areas intensified the sense of insecurity among highlanders. Under the name of reforestation projects, a more rigid control of the land by the state has been in operation, and officially highlanders can be relocated at short notice. Moreover, as entrepreneurs and speculators have encroached on mountain areas and hill land has been bought and sold for the recent development of agricultural plantations, tourist resorts and golf courses, the amount of land available for settlement has declined. Under such pressure, highlanders have been forced to leave and move elsewhere in search of a livelihood. Many have taken up residence in the lowlands. As a result, an increasing number of the Akha, in particular the young generation between the ages of 15-35, are moving down into lowland society to seek paid employment, education opportunities and experience.

The spread of the Thai school education system has created a huge gap between the literate and the illiterate; this is now often the case between younger and older generations. In the face of change the recognition of a wider range of lifestyles, particularly amongst the younger generation, has accompanied the devaluation of the cultural knowledge of Akha elders. The illiterate elders have lost their position in the society. Youths used to respect their elders; now it is difficult for the elders to obtain respect from the younger generation. Now the young generation start seeking work outside the village as soon as they finish their sixth grade of education, or even earlier. If they can, they often go straight down to Chiang Mai. Many of those who study at the lowland schools in Chiang Rai and Mae Chan go down to look for jobs in Chiang Mai during the school holidays. In fact, highlanders are preferred employees due to their acceptance of lower than average pay for unskilled jobs, particularly in the case of those who only hold hill tribe ID cards. Thus, it is not too difficult to find jobs as waitresses, housemaids, petrol pump attendants and night guards. Indeed, the dis-satisfactions with their working conditions is in-

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19) See the studies on female employment and urban migration in North Thailand [Gray 1990 ; Singhanetra-Renard and Prabhudhanitisarn 1992].

escapable; however, they know that they would be paid even less in their home place. Thus, they find being in Chiang Mai is a better choice as there are "more jobs and more fun." Some informants perceive that they can gain experience and learn new things in Chiang Mai, whereas in the village they feel there is nothing to learn.

For the younger generations who are already familiar with the urban life-style, the social distance between villages and towns is much closer than I expected. Now that the condition of the roads has been improved, motorbikes have become an important means of transportation between locations. In the early 1980s, there were hardly any motorbikes in the villages; however, in the late 1990s, the noise of motorbikes is common in the mountains, even in the remote villages. Once urban Akha purchased a motorbike, in a manner of speaking the effective distance between town and village is greatly reduced. According to an informant (male 26), "There is not much difference to me between village and town." He first stayed in Chiang Mai at a temple at the age of 10. Since then he has moved between the village and Chiang Mai several times. After he purchased his motorbike at the age of 22, he has been able to go back and forth several times a year. He explains that, "I have my house and my friends both in Chiang Rai and in Chiang Mai." Among the young generation, those who have experience of working in Bangkok, Malaysia and Taiwan are not uncommon. They regard Chiang Mai as a place "close to the village." For them, the distance between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai is "nothing." It seems that with the development of the transport system, Chiang Mai is no longer perceived a migrants' destination, but rather has become part of their extended domain of social networks.

On the other hand, some of the older generation who stayed behind in the villages have become discouraged and have lost confidence. They cannot find a satisfactory role in their society, but welcome those trained in the lowlands who choose to return. An informant (female 21), who finished her high school education and worked in Chiang Mai and Bangkok for a year and a half, and who is now back in her village working as a state kindergarten teacher said, "When I was living in town I was nothing, but here I am being treated as a big person. My parents takes care of me very well: Mother cooks meals for me and washes my clothes for me; Father takes me anywhere anytime on his motorbike like a taxi driver. My parents consult me about everything. They totally rely on me. In fact, it is not only my parents but most elder people in this village who rely on me, because there are hardly any young people in this village." This shift in the power relationship between the younger generation and older generation can be found in most villages in Thailand.

Some of the older generation are disoriented, and many now rely heavily on drugs. In fact it is not only those among the older generation but also quite a few among the discouraged younger generation, who failed to make it into a brighter future with their friends, who turn to drugs for consolation and addiction. Their numbers have recently grown at an alarming rate. It is an ironic paradox that while the production of opium had been successfully reduced, serious addictions to heroin and other drugs has increased. The increased drug problems are causing further urban migration, particularly amongst young women.

An informant (female 21) told me why she ran away from her village. Her father had re-

cently become a drug addict, and she felt upset when she saw her father beating her mother because she did not give him all the money she earned for her wage labour – 60 Baht a day. He wanted money for his drugs whereas her mother tried to keep the money for food and education for the children. If she stayed with her parents, she had to give the money she earned to her father, which he would use to buy drugs. She felt sorry for her mother, but she decided to leave home, so she could use all the money for her own further education. When she goes home, she secretly gives some money to her mother in order to help her younger sister go to school, but she tries to avoid meeting her father. Kammerer also noted that, “Among Akha women, the wish to avoid marriage with an addict or future addict has been a catalyst for high levels of urban migration” [Kammerer *et al.* 1995:60]. She then considered that this phenomenon increases the risk of HIV infection, because a cash market exists in which sex for money drives them to seek employment in bustling urban areas as prostitutes.

However, some informants suggested to the contrary, that staying in the village leads to a higher risk of HIV infection. According to an informant (female 23) her friend married an Akha man who became heroin addicted and used to share needles with other villagers. Eventually, he was infected with HIV and then infected his wife, the informant’s friend. The informant told me that if she had stayed in her village, she would have married an Akha like her friend did, and maybe ended up with the same situation. In her words, “Drugs are easily available in the village. You can also find drug addicted children. Some drug dealers even sell it to school children. These children do not know what they are doing. They are just imitating adults’ behaviour. It is really scary. So I do not want to send my children to a village school. I hope to marry with a non-Akha man and live in town in the future.”

Marriages arranged by parents, relatives or friends are still common among the Akha. Recently, arranged marriages organised not just through local social networks but also through the highly developed international agencies involving Japanese, Taiwanese and Westerners have emerged. The parents encourage their daughters to marry with an affluent suitor instead poor Akha men. They acknowledge that economic concerns in assessing suitable mates for marriage became critical to secure their own life and the future of their descendants. Thus, it is not uncommon to find parents persuading their daughters to marry a well-off non-Akha men, even if he is older than the parents themselves.<sup>20)</sup> An informant (female 21) confessed why she ran away from her village to hide herself in Chiang Mai to her friend: “My father arranged my marriage with a Japanese man, but I do not want to get married to a man I have never met before. My father has already received money from the agency. So I ran away from home because I was afraid of being sent to Japan.” This type of unwanted arranged marriage also caused further urban migration by young female.

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20) Some young Akha girls in Chiang Mai also expressed that they would prefer to marry with well-off elderly non-Akha men to enjoy the security of marriage than marrying with poor young Akha men to suffer the economic hardship. Mix marriage for young Akha girls’ with much older non-Akha men is frequent. The most extreme case to be found in Chiang Mai was a 16 years Akha girl with 70 years old non-Akha man.

There were no Christian Akha in Thailand until the early 1960s, and Christian missionaries used to bemoan their lack of success in converting Akha. However, in the last twenty years or so, the number of the Christian Akha has grown swiftly. Reasons often given for conversion were their inability to keep up with the requirements of Akhazang, economic or political pressures, and the loss or lack of knowledge of the Akhazang [see Kammerer 1990 ; 1996 ; Tooker 1992:806]. These phenomena can be observed both in the village and the city. An informant (Female 21) who works in Chiang Mai was surprised to see that all those remained in her natal village converted to Christianity.<sup>21)</sup> She said, "Nobody was Christian in this village just three months ago, when I came back last time. But now you can find two churches in the village and everyone is Christian." The house warming ceremony she was attending was conducted by a young Burmese Christian Akha. He had started coming to this village once a week to preach in Akha over the past two months. He has a wife and child on the Burmese side, but three days a week, he comes to the Thai side. He said, "In the future, I want to move to Thailand with my family, because in Thailand Akha villages lack Akha preachers. We are providing training for young people to teach the Bible by giving scholarships. Thailand has money and they can build churches, but there are not enough Akha preachers." He is a well-educated (he finished college in Burma) well-mannered and energetic young man and many villagers like him. After the ceremony, my informant from Chiang Mai asked her mother whether she understood his prayers. She answered, "Not at all, all I know is to say 'Amen' at the end. But it does not matter. Everyone is the same. We are happy that he came around, otherwise we could not 'carry' a proper way. Now no one in the village can conduct a proper Akha way. So we had a problem. But after he came, we do not have to worry any more. He knows we are poor, so he introduced us a cheaper way."

Since the Akha are surrounded by numerous other ethnic groups and are aware of many different types of *zang* (a way of life) besides their own, they prefer to carry a proper *zang* no matter what it is, rather than carry the Akhazang improperly. In this sense, as Kammerer [1990:287-288] suggested, Akha Christianity is best characterized as a replacement: Christian customs are used as a substitute for traditional customs, as most converted Akha were simply seeking a cheaper and easier substitute for their own tradition by discarding the heavy burden of Akha customs.<sup>22)</sup>

Regarding the young generation, particularly young girls who cannot stay at temples, free

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21) The author also visited her village twice with her to observe the change in 1995.

22) Akha folktales account for the reason why Akha have to carry more "*zang*" (customs) than the others: when people of all kinds went to the dwelling place of the Creator to receive customs, all except the Akha carried a loosely woven basket. Since the Akha went with a tightly woven sack of the sort used to carry rice grain home from the fields, on the way back home the Akha did not lose a single piece of customs, whereas the others' customs fell out through the holes in the others' baskets. That is why the Akha customs are many and heavy while the others are few and light. Towards the Akha who carry such heavy burden of the customs, Christianity invites them to throw them away by referring to the verse from Matthew 11:28 "All people tired from carrying the heavy load on their backs, come to my dwelling place. I will give" [see Kammerer 1996:323-326].



accommodation, education and food provided by Christian Missionary organisations is a bonus. An informant (male 38) who sent two of his daughter to such an institution said, "When they are in the lowland they behave as Christians, they know exactly what they have to do. But when they come back home in the village, they are not Christian, they are my daughters, so I teach them the Akha way. They are clever enough to behave correctly in both places." This is the way Akha people use available identities to carry on social life. Here, what I mean to identity is the presentation of self.<sup>23)</sup>

When they claim to become Christian Akha as opposed to non-Christian, this also implies they have developed and become educated to join the realm of civilization. This is due to the missionary idea of "bringing tribal and other ethnic groups from the darkness of demon worship into the light of Jesus' teaching" [Kammerer 1996:330]. Such a view encourages them to look down on the non-Christian Akha, calling them "old-fashioned" and "stupid," in spite of the fact the Akha used to have a cultural relativist view towards differences between people without any judgment or exclusiveness; today the friction and the power tension between the Christian Akha and non-Christian Akha, and between different Christian Akha groups, is evident.

Christian institutions can, on the other hand, drive family members apart. For example, three daughters of a man who was a priest in their home village were sent to the lowlands for education through Christian organisations. It turned out that each of his daughters belonged to a different church; the first daughter in a special sect run by Americans; the second daughter in an organisation run by Koreans, the third daughter in a Roman Catholic organisation run by Italians. Strict regulations did not allow the three daughters to visit each other while they were growing up. Thus these three daughters did not have a chance to develop close bonds between them. At present, all of them are living in Chiang Mai, however they hardly meet each other. Their father is puzzled, saying, "We have got an education but lost our family ties."

In 1993, urban Akha formed an association modelled after the Overseas Chinese benevolent societies that make provisions for and arrange funerals. With the aim of eventually buying land for a graveyard, yearly dues of 100 Baht per person were collected from its members, including Akha traditionalists, Protestants, and Catholics [see also *ibid.*:332,333]. The association started with 45 people and had grown to be over 300 in 1996. However, friction among its members was inevitable and the triumvirate leadership found it difficult to work together. As time passed, some dropped out of the association. One such informant said. "You might call us 'Akha', but in fact we are not the same. The Akha in Chiang Mai are different from each other. It is difficult to help each other because everyone wanted only to help their own group of people." This implies that a category labeled as the Akha ethnic group did not retain a shared interest strong enough to embrace the urban Akha members in Chiang Mai. Instead, they found that they were much more different from each other than they had expected. When the father of one of the deputy

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23) Tooker [1992:799-819] interprets such a way of switching identities occurring because their ethno-religious identity is not an interiorised notion but takes an exteriorised form, and she pointed out the problems of applying such western notions of identity to the Akha case.

chairmen (a female, 34, married an American) of this association died, they conducted a Buddhist cremation rather than an Akha burial. The daughter said, "We have been living in Chiang Mai for 25 years. This is an appropriate way. Since the land price rose, we never know when we can afford to buy land." At the time of the funeral, her brother ordained as a monk for a week. In spite of the fact that she used to propose an idealistic ethnic goal, in practice she settled for a practical solution. It was in the end the price of land that determined their choice of ceremony.

In terms of the wider politico-economic milieu, an interesting phenomenon today is the growing prestige of the Chinese within Thai society. In the past, in order to encourage their integration into Thai society, people of Chinese origin were discouraged from projecting their Chinese identity [see for example Vatikiotis 1996]. In the present post-socialist age, this is no longer an issue. On the contrary, China is regarded as providing a great economic opportunity and the popularity of studying Chinese has greatly increased. The importance of Chinese language is recognised by the Akha.

Recently, Taiwanese churches close to the border have become popular. A village headman (male 52), who invited a Taiwanese church to his village said, "The Taiwanese understand our worship for ancestors. They teach the ethic of filial piety. They are more or less like us and they do not look down on us. They also teach us Chinese." There are various Christian agencies working in north Thailand today. The different contexts and agencies should be taken into consideration in order to examine their influences. Taiwanese churches often provide Chinese language lessons during the evening or at the weekend under the guise of 'Bible study'. In this regard, converting to Christianity provides an opportunity to find a better job and a better life. This is an undeniable motivation for conversion, especially among the young generation, whose parents cannot afford to send them for private Chinese lessons. According to an informant (male 23), it costs 75,000 Baht to arrange work in Taiwan, and obviously those with language ability gain an advantage. "Those who can speak Chinese need to pay only half price, and those who can speak a few Chinese dialects can obtain a passport free of charge from a Taiwanese broker." Moreover, at the border area between Thailand and Burma I witnessed that some Yunnanese Chinese claiming to be Akha in order to obtain identification papers so they could work in Taiwan. One homeless informant (male 16) holds an ID card indicating that he is Akha. Nevertheless, it turned out during the interview that neither of his parents are Akha. He was identified as an Akha by the administrators because he was able to speak the Akha language. In these cases ethnic category is a category of expediency.

## V Social Relations and Identities<sup>24)</sup> of the Akha in Chiang Mai

In this section, the various social relations and identities of four key urban Akha informants

24) What I mean by 'identity' here is social identity, continuously constructed in interaction with others, and it should be distinguished from the notion of 'ego', or 'personality' as used in western psychology.

will be discussed. Social relations, religion, languages, economic status and life experiences determine their choice of identity. The oscillation among identities by a single individual at different stages of their life will be also illustrated. I intend to examine the way in which the four different levels of socio-political settings – 1) Power differences between individuals, 2) Chiang Mai as an ethnic plural society, 3) Thai national policy and hilltribes, 4) International socio-political demands – facilitate different identity options.

*Case 1 Christian Identity*

*Ulo Akha (male 28)*

When the informant was a child to obtain primary education he ordained as a Buddhist monk and remained in the Sangha for four years. At that time he was recruited there was tension in his home because his father's second wife did not get on well with his mother (the first wife) and he was not particularly happy at home. He welcomed the opportunity to study Thai in town. He was a serious boy and hard-working boy and did well in his studies. He enjoyed meditation as it helped relax his mind. However, he was not really happy because he was sensitive towards the way other Thai looked down on him. Before going down to town, he never paid attention to whether he was Akha or Thai; however, being in the temple, he had to face a situation where the image of the hill tribes and the Akha in particular was already defined by Thailand's hill tribe development policy as a disadvantage second-class citizen. Thus during that time, he inevitably became aware of the power relations between Thai and the hill tribes, and consequently, he developed many friendships with other hill tribe boys, but he had few Thai friends. He thought that it would be good for him to learn not only Thai language, but also how to behave as a Thai within a society that has a strict pecking order.

After he had completed his secondary level education, he went back to his village to help his parents. He worked in the agricultural fields near his village, owned by Thai farmers. The wage was only 60 Baht a day. After two years, he decided to go down to town to look for a better paid job. He worked for a bread making factory where accommodation and food were provided, earning 80 Baht a day. After a while he became bored with this routine. He then worked during the day at a restaurant washing dishes (2,500 Baht a month), and in the evening as a parking guard (1,500 Baht a month). Most of his work mates were young hill tribe men like himself, and the manager was a Thai. Thus the power relation between the Thai as employers and hill tribes as employees, became embedded in his mind and his Akha identity was strengthened. During that time, he started going to an Akha church<sup>25)</sup> on Sunday with one of his work mate (an Akha male). The initial reason was, "I had problem with my health which even a medical doctor in town could not cure. My friend told me if I became a Christian, I would get better, so I became Christian."

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25) Akha church helps strengthen the bonds of common ethnic solidarity. The service is conducted by Akha in the Akha language, and the participants are exclusively Akha people. In this particular church, over 100 Akha, born both in Thailand and Burma, assemble every Sunday. Most of the participants are youths. It sometimes provides opportunities for youngsters to meet their future spouses.

He met an Akha Christian girl from Burma at an Akha church, and under her influence he recently decided to become a Christian. According to him, the reason for this choice is as follows: he already knew for a long time that he had to find an alternative way to the Akha way of life because continuing the Akha way is not practical today. In his words, "It takes too much time and it costs too much money." While a monk, he tried to understand Buddhism, but he could not help being put off by the Thai attitude towards hill tribes. He had self-respect, and did not feel comfortable with Thai Buddhist way, although he liked some ideas of Buddhism ideas and enjoyed practicing meditation. Therefore, he saw Christianity as a compromise. He explained, "If I took Akha or Buddhist way, I would have to worry about being poor. Particularly because my parents are old, I would have to worry whether I had enough money to provide a proper funeral ceremony. In the Akha way, it is important to sacrifice a buffalo for the funeral. But when my grandmother died, our family did not have enough money and had to sacrifice a pig instead. Other villagers pointed at us saying, 'Why did you sacrifice a pig? A misfortune might come because you did not satisfy your ancestor'. As Christian we do not have to worry or ashamed of being poor." He added, "We have to develop our villages and people so that the Thais do not look down on us. Christians help us to develop our villages and help us to go to school. We Akha people have to help each other to improve our standard of living." Obviously, he claimed to be a Christian as a way to oppose to Thai Buddhist majority.

The actors' individual self conscious selection of their identity and the oscillation between these identities in different life stages were observed. 'Self-driven' aspects – the 'meaning' that the human being has conceived in his subjective experience – is a direct determinant of all intentional behaviour, and thus should not be ignored. As this case indicates, identity changes through the life cycle because it is continuously being defined by and in one's experience of interaction with others. Identities are not always passively influenced by the situations but different individuals respond differently towards the same circumstances.

*Cace 2 Tai Identity*<sup>26)</sup>

*Lomi Akha (female 33)*

Born in Burma, this informant lost her father when she was a baby. She was the fifth child in a family of 15 brothers and sisters. Because of the poverty of her family, at the age of 10 she was adopted by a Yunnanese Chinese family, which meant she had to work for them as a housemaid free of charge. She was unhappy with her situation and after a few years ran away. She then found a job making dolls. She was one of 4 young girls employed by a Tai Lue family. They were provided with food and accommodation. In return, the girls did housework in addition to doll making. She thought that the Tai Lue manager was a kind person as he sometimes provided them with clothes. However, the life was routine and their wage was low. Thus, at the age of 17, she crossed the border with her friends to look for a better job in Thailand.

At first, she stayed in Mae Sai for four years. She took various jobs; selling drinks on the

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26) The term "Tai" was used here in order to differentiate from Thai national identity.

street, washing and ironing clothes, selling miscellaneous goods in a shop, making handicrafts. Thanks to her language ability – being able to speak Tai-Lue which is similar to northern Thai and Yunnanese Chinese – she manages to find jobs without being badly exploited. This contrasts with other young Akha women, born in Thailand but unable to speak Thai, who are often cheated by harsh employment agencies which prey on gullible young girls. She worked from 5 A.M. till after midnight every day for four years. She had only a few clothes, but tried to accumulate as much money as possible because she dreamed of having her own handicraft shop in Chiang Mai. She recalled that she could endure such a tough life because she had no place to go back to. In 1984, she came to Chiang Mai, and opened a stall selling handicrafts at the Night Bazaar. Some Tai Lue friends helped her to find Tai Lue antique handicrafts from Laos. As the tourist industry in Chiang Mai expanded in the mid 1980s her business succeeded.

Her working partner, a northern Thai man (35), claims that his grandparents are Tai Lue from Burma. He worked in Bangkok for three years, but came back to stay in Chiang Mai, where he feels, much more at home speaking in northern Thai. Indeed their common language is a northern Thai. Although her real mother tongue is Akha, since she left her family she has used Tai Lue language most often, thus she thinks that “it is also my mother tongue.” In spite of the fact that many of the Lomi Akha from Burma are Christian, in her case, due to her extended period of living with a Tai Lue family, she is more familiar with Northern Thai Buddhism, Yuan cult.<sup>27)</sup> This familiarity with Tai language and religion helped her to adapt to life in Chiang Mai.

As the service industry has developed in Thailand during the 1990s, the number of domestic tourists has increased. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand in Chiang Mai in 1994, the number of tourists who visited Northern Thailand was 865,144 foreigners and 1,321,164 Thai. Investment in tourism has grown with capital from Bangkok. As a consequence, local small scale tourism businesses have found it difficult to survive. Both my informant and her northern Thai partner complained, “Bangkok people are rich and arrogant. They built a big shopping complex. Now the tourists like to buy things from there. They do not buy from us any longer. Moreover, they tried to remove our shops for their own sake.” In this situation, ‘our’ indicates the local small scale traders including both hilltribes and northern Thai as the local competition to commercial operators from Bangkok.

### *Cace 3 Chinese Identity*

#### *Pami Akha (male 32)*

Chiang Mai residents tended to stereotype typical migrants from the hills as living in slums, sharing a small space with their own extended family members or other people from home village, employed for low wages and addicted to drugs. However, in contrast close investigation reveals that the most striking characteristic of the Urban Akha is the difference between rich and

27) Northern Thai experienced little direct influence from the Siamese court of Bangkok until nearly the end of 19th century. The local version of Theravada Buddhism, Yuan cult is followed by the Tai-speaking peoples in the Shan state in Burma, northern Laos, southern China and northern Thailand [Keyes 1971:552].

poor. Those who are economically successful live very comfortably.

This informant's father was born in Sipsongpanna in China and earned his living as a trader. He married seven times, having two wives in China and supported five wives concurrently in several house holds. After 1949, the informant's family moved to Burma. In 1971, when he was six years old, they settled down in Keng Tung. He knows nothing about agriculture. All of his family are traders. His father bought a truck from the American army in the Shan States, thus the family business covered a region including Rangoon and Mandalay in Burma, North Thailand and the Yunnan Province of China. His main trading partners were Yunnanese Chinese, Akha and Tai Lue. By the time he moved to Thailand in 1977, he could speak Akha, Yunnanese Chinese, Tai Lue and Burmese. While he was completing his high school grade, he also went to a Chinese school supported by the Taiwanese. When he graduated from high school, he went to Taiwan for further education to study Mandarin, Hokkien, English and Business Studies for seven years. After that, he went to Australia for two years to gain work experience as well as to study English. In Australia, he experienced discrimination. "No matter how much money I have, they discriminate against us (Asians)." Thus, he regards Thailand as a good place to live because material wealth determines social position rather than how a person looks. In his words, "No matter who you are or where you are from, as long as you have money, you have power."

Transnational ethnic minorities have remained outside the process of territorial integration which has been characterised by the emergence of increasingly centralised modern state. Some ethnic minorities are widely scattered over large areas across several countries and therefore in a position to exploit the advantages of personal and linguistic links throughout the region. The economically successful Akha often organise their own business networks not only with lowland Thai but also with traders from China, Burma, Laos, Taiwan and Singapore, utilising their extensive language ability and their social networks which are a valuable legacy of their migration history. He now has three passports – Chinese, Burmese, and Thai – and this enables him to exercise supranational strategies. As a successful Akha trader (male 52) who has visited 16 different countries once observed "The Akha has no nation; we have no place to be, but at the same time it means we can live anywhere and go everywhere."

In the context of Thai society, 'hill tribes' are considered to be a low class social group. The Akha, particularly, tend to be viewed as the lowest of the low even among the hill tribes. It is thus not surprising that I came across situations where elite Akha were reluctant to identify themselves as Akha. They prefer to differentiate themselves from the so-called 'Akha category'.

All of the Akha who reside in Thailand at present come from Yunnan province in China. However, as noted in the previous section some sub-groups associate themselves more strongly with their Chinese origins than others. When Pami Akha want to differentiate themselves from Ulo Akha, the majority Akha group in Thailand, one choice available is to project themselves as being of Chinese descent. With the growing prestige of China, no longer a political threat but a great economic opportunity, they are proud to recall their Chinese origins. The standard of living of this Akha elite and the emphasis they place on life ceremonies such as marriages and

funerals makes it impossible to distinguish them from overseas Chinese. Most carry business name cards with Chinese characters on the back. This is also an indication of 'status'.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that some Pami Akha feel a closer affinity with the Yunnanese Chinese, Overseas Chinese or Taiwanese as potential trade partners than the Ulo Akha. Among the informant's family, the second brother married a Yunnanese Chinese, the fourth brother married an Overseas Chinese (潮中), the seventh sister married an Overseas Chinese (客家), and my informant married a Taiwanese. These inter-ethnic marriages indeed strengthen their cross-border social networks.

#### *Cace 4 Akha Identity*

##### *Ulo Akha (male 30)*

This informant is the youngest son (the ninth) in his family. Since his village was part of a Border Patrol Police education project set up in the 1970s, he had access to Thai education. With the support of his elder brothers and sisters, he was sent to school. He finished his elementary school in the village, then went down to Chiang Rai to start secondary school. He was a diligent student and subsequently won a place at a University in Bangkok to study law. After having finished the degree, he started work as a bank clerk. Like many of the younger Akha generation, because the distance between the home and school or work place was too great to commute daily he spent most of his adolescent period away from his village. Thus he could only see his parents during the school holidays. He married a Lahu woman (26) who is working at a hospital in Bangkok. They have known each other since they both completed high school in Chiang Mai. She studied nursing at a college in Chiang Mai.

A 'proper' Akha marriage ceremony was held in his village. The sacrificed pig was over 150 kg. According to the villagers, "It was the best of all held over the last thirty years." The groom explained why he choose to have an Akha (marriage). This was done with reference to his study of human rights at university. He is well aware of international movements to preserve indigenous cultures. He thought it important to record Akha customs before they die out. Thus he had asked his sister (31), who used to work as a trekking tour guide, to take as many photographs as possible of the whole ceremony. She also thought this is a good idea as she can use the photographs to present Akha culture as an exotic phenomenon to tourists. He said, "In fact, I hardly know about Akha culture, so this is a good occasion." His house is one of the most affluent houses in the village, a solid modern two-storey building. On the day of the wedding, the house was decorated in such a way that it could be seen by all the villagers. Whereas some of the older people were paid to perform the marriage ceremony, many villagers did not join the ceremony. One of the villagers told me on the way to work at the nearby garlic plantation owned by a lowland Thai, "They are rich so they can afford the Akha way. We are poor, we do it in a simpler and cheaper Christian way. We cannot even afford to attend the ceremony because we need to earn money day by day. If we do not go to work we cannot receive our daily wage of 60 Bahts." The groom may well not have intended, his marriage to be seen as a demonstration of wealth, but that was how most people saw it.

The participants in this event consisted of the urban Akha who came back to the village for a few days to attend the ceremony, and some old people who were paid to conduct the 'authentic' Akha ritual. Thus at some stages of the service, when the old people were chanting ritual songs which lasted for a few hours, the young generation became bored because they could not understand them. Many started watching TV. The noise of the TV and the laughter of the young generation from the first floor was more powerful than the chanting by the old people on the second floor. Nevertheless, the groom did not mind as his ceremony was "successfully documented" and good enough for him to show his 'unique' Akha identity to his educated friends.

## VI Conclusion

The ability to switch and to manipulate sets of identities has long been recognised in the field of anthropology. The paper documents ways in which Akha manipulate identity sets in the urban setting of Chiang Mai. It is apparent from the four case studies that they have several options open to them from which they can arbitrarily choose to be, Christians, northern Thais, Chinese or Akha.

Different experiences of individuals and various socio-political factors influence their choice of identities. Thus unlike the classic assimilation model which assumes that the adaptation process works in a single direction from being 'Akha' to becoming 'Thai', they are continually reconstructing individual identity in response to their immediate socio-political settings. As Lilley noted, "Ethnic groups are not fixed entities opposed to one another by stable internal structures and external boundaries" [Lilley 1990:181]: it is fallacious to demarcate exclusive deterministic boundaries between ethnic categories. It is more realistic to view identification and affiliation as a choice based on an ongoing dialogue between subjective determinants and objective elements — the context and power relations.

It should be also noted that such situational selections of identities is not a recent phenomena, not just a result of urban migration, but has been employed for centuries by Akha in continuous interaction with neighbouring groups. The Akha have always been influenced by the dominant polity of the region. Identities are the product of historical contingencies and thus always subject to change.

In the future, as case study four indicated, Akha cultural distinctiveness is most likely to be produced through tourism and international movement committed to the preservation of indigenous culture and supported by educated Akha. Urban Akha are in the position of recording, and creating a self-image of 'traditional' Akha culture. Some are involved in projects for the preservation of indigenous cultures that work with Non-Governmental Organisations or the hill tribes museum project by the Thai government. In this process, they are recording culture as a fixed object of the past, separated from everyday existence. This process of separation, and the selection of representative cultural features sometimes leads to friction within groups.<sup>28)</sup> It was



interesting to observe that the documentation process itself leads to a sort of homogenisation in which, actual variations within an ethnic group are rejected. Competition to be the authority on 'authentic Akha traditional culture' emerges.

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28) Political competition for claiming 'authenticity' was evident among various Hani/Akha participants from China, Burma and Thailand at the Second International Hani/Akha Studies Conference 12-18 May 1996 in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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